Reviewing The New Books

Glenway Wescott Breaks His Silence With War Novel

APARTMENT IN ATHENS

By Glenway Wescott. (Harper; $2.50.)

By Mary-Carter Roberts

The chief thing about this novel is that it marks Glenway Wescott's return to the writing world. The book itself is not any great shakes. At least, it is not to come from the once spectacularly talented pen of its author. It is a war novel and one can say that it is literature. Its merit, however, lies in its workmanship—its structure and its polish—rather than in any more memorable quality. It shows us Nazis abusing helpless citizens in an occupied state and we all know that Nazis do that and we know pretty much how. Mr. Wescott paints the picture with an artist's brush, but he puts very little in his canvas that is not common knowledge.

What has not been such common knowledge is his own career these past 10 years. He, a fortune's child, a very model of the bright young man of the 20s, disappeared from the literary landscape back in 1927 after winning, as a climax to a meteroic rise to fame, the Harper prize with his novel, "The Grandmothers." There was a subsequent collection of his short stories, but when, a few seasons ago, a novelette, "The Pilgrim Hawk," appeared bearing his name, it was like a voice from the past. One said wonderingly, "Glenway Wescott! Where has he been all this time?" A preface to the work offered his own explanation of his silence. He had discovered, he said, very honestly, that he had nothing significant to say. The novelette, a psychological study of love, was a fine piece of work, but so slight that it could hardly be taken as a resurgence of the old Wescott brilliance. And after it, the silence closed in again.

Wescott Has Changed.

The current book, therefore, raises a question. Has Mr. Wescott carried on the great promise of his youth? My answer would be that he has reappeared in a vein of quiet and sure artistic competence, but without his old imaginative force. "Apartment In Athens" shows us that he has not deteriorated as a workman. But he has changed tremendously.

GLENWAY WESCOTT.

The book deals with Nazi brutality in the narrow scope of the experience of one Greek family. Instead of showing us battalions of innocent hostages being murdered or whole villages laid waste, it gives us just four people—a father, a mother and two young children—who suffer from proximity to one German—a major who is quartered in their apartment. At first their miseries are physical. The German takes all but one room for himself, he abuses the children, forces the cultured parents to give him menial service and, aware that the starving Greeks will eat whatever is left of his own generous meals, takes care to give the remains to the dog of a friend. This goes on for months. Then the major visits Germany on leave and comes back a seemingly changed man.

German Beastiliness.

His own family has been destroyed in an air raid, he tells his Greek hosts. He has come to realize what misery there is in war. He seems to use gentleness and pity toward his victims. The new mood, however, is a subtle trick. The German is genuinely unhappy and finally takes his own life, but his essential beastliness is unchanged. Even in death he is venemous. For he leaves a note suggesting to his fellow Germans that they accuse the Greeks of his murder and make a wholesome disciplinary use of his self-destruction. Such is his fanaticism that he would turn his own suicide into a service for the Reich.

There is very little of what is commonly called action in the story. Its technical achievement is that it moves without moving, that it finally arrives at its point after remaining almost static. The great part of the volume is concerned simply with creating the atmosphere of the apartment — the cowed, silenced, stunned atmosphere of gentleness confronted by brutality. The characters are not sharp, the scenes are described instead of presented. There is a quality of arrested motion about the whole work. A sensitive reader will see the skill which has gone into making the effect. But one less sentitive will be apt to ask himself when something is going to happen.

Faces in a Dusty Picture

By Gerald Kersh. (Whittlesey House; $2.)

Not since I read the combat scenes of "Immortal Sergeant," have I come on so enthralling an account of desert fighting as this book contains. The thirst, the dust, the flies, the heat, the exhaustion—all those curses with which deserts afflict men are dealt with in this novelette with something like unbearable vividness. As is also the mounting sense of suspense as a battle moves toward its climax. For a straight piece of combat fiction, "Faces in a Dusty Picture" is a memorable performance.

It tells no more than how a small British Army, caught between the sea and a large Germany Army, saves itself by making a forced march inland and taking a strong Italian fort. The march is an agony. It is made at extreme speed and on low water rations. It is strafed by enemy planes and given the gratuitous handicap of a dust storm. Men fall and are left behind. Medical supplies are, as usual, insufficient. The mass movement and feeling is brilliantly executed by the author's device of shifting from thoughts of one soldier to another, of showing, as the title states, "faces in a dusty picture." Out of the scattered pieces of individual suffering we get the whole and get it unforgettably.

But the author disposes of the actual battle very casually. The fort ought to require a terrible assault, for it is immensely strong. Yet it falls, we are told, within a few minutes. Of course, it is an Italian fort. But the reader is apt to feel that Mr. Kersh is a little too realistic on the point. For the sake of his art he really should have made the Eyeties fight.

Leyte Calling

By Lt. Joseph F. St. John, as told to Howard Handleman. (Vanguard Press; $2.)

Reviewed by J. K. VAN DENBURG.

The life of a guerrilla in the Philippines was not that of a swashbuckling, devil-may-care bravo who laughs in the face of an enemy patrol and cuts loose with submachine gun. According to Lt. St. John it was a lonely, disease-ridden dog's life, filled with fear and privation, in which rescue and return to his homeland at first was only a forlorn hope.

Lt. St. John lived on Leyte from June, 1942, until its liberation last October. Originally a ground crewman in a bomber squadron he and a few other Americans were shipwrecked on Southern Leyte when they fled Mindanao in the face of the Jap advance.

The enemy never occupied the southern part of the island in force. But they soon learned of the presence of the Americans and strong patrols roamed the hills on their trail. The Americans survived only by the aid of loyal Filipinos—at whose number and devotion the author constantly marvels.

With salvaged radio parts and later with equipment which reached them through secret channels from our forces far to the south the Americans set up a ship-spotting service and reported enemy movements to our headquarters.

When the Leyte landings came Lt. St. John says it was like a miracle. Rocket-launching assault boats, the many different types of landing craft, amphibious tanks and trucks, the modern weapons carried by our troops all were new. And all proved their worth.

American Patrol Arrives.

Lt. St. John's guerrilla force kept off the way, following radio orders, and finally, eight days after invasion, an American patrol made contact. With the patrol was Mr. Handleman, a war correspondent. This book apparently was based on interviews in the days which remained before Lt. St. John was shipped home.

It is written in straightforward style, all in the first person. However, the dialogue does not ring quite true to this reviewer's conception of how an excited liberated guerrilla would talk. The sentences are too self-consciously short, bearing too deep a brand from the typewriter of a professional writer.

But the style does not dim an exciting story of faithful soldiers carrying on with the aid of devoted Filipinos.

Trials and Sufferings of American Internees in Santo Tomas Prison

THE OPEN CITY

By Shelly Smith Mydans. (Doubleday, Doran; $2.50.)

Reviewed by FRANCIS P. DOUGLAS.

This timely novel has for its scene the internment camp of Santo Tomas in Manila.

The first impulse of the reader who has known Shelly Mydans and her husband, Carl Mydans, Life photographer, who were taken prisoner by the Japanese and held in Santo Tomas for eight months, is to ask why Shelly Mydans did not write a factual report.

Such a work would have covered the Mydans' transfer to Shanghai and their ultimate repatriation on the Gripsholm. And it would have told more about Shelly and Carl Mydans, in whom many already are interested.

But Mrs. Mydans' choice of the form of her work was wise. Instead of an objective, journalistic report, she is able to give more in a sensitive description of Americans in captivity and how they reacted according to their different characters.

Her central figures are three girls. One, Katharine, was sent by her husband to the "safety" of Manila from a mine in the southern islands; she does not hear from him again. The third evokes this phrase from one of the men in Santo Tomas: "I think a woman ought to have more than just a body."

Photograph, taken from a captured Jap serviceman, showing internees lined up in a mess hall in Santo Tomas internment camp for one of their meager meals.

Mrs. Mydans' book gives you the hunger of the prisoners, their boredom, their frustrated longings, their reactions to the lack of privacy and dignity in their crowded quarters. There are people worth your admiration — and shabby ones. Through the meanness of one of the shabbiest comes more tragedy.

Mrs. Mydans makes you realize what it meant to those people when the American troops finally came up the street outside the gate bringing freedom with them. For Katharine, who felt her responsibilities to her fellow prisoners and to her country, freedom meant "freedom to cry."

Brief Reviews

AT HOME.

How to Cook, by Marjorie Griffin. (Garden City.) A kitchen manual which is intended as a guide to the interpretation of all recipes. Illustrated.

It's Fun to Make It Yourself, by Stacey Maney. (Journal of Living Publishing Corp.) Directions for making practically all the commonplace home articles and for some not common. One thousand photographs, charts, diagrams and drawings.

Handbook of Drapery Patterns, by Ina M. Germaine. (McBride.) Directions for making 40 different types of draperies. Diagrams.

AVIATION.

Young America's Aviation Annual, by David C. Cooke. (McBride.) The current edition of this well-known work.

CARTOONS.

Welcome Home! by Gregory d'Alessio. (McBride.) A Collier's cartoonist offers a small volume of drawings, mainly on the return of soldiers to civilian life.

HUMOR.

I Feel Like a Cad, by Sergt. Larry Reynolds. (McBride.) A collection of cartoons on the life of Butch the Burglar, previously published in Collier's.

THRILLERS AND MYSTERIES.

Cobwebs and Clues, by Ernestine Malan and Alma K. Ledig. Crime in a convalescent home. Good routine.

Pause to Wonder, edited by Marjorie Fascher and Rolfe Humphries. (Julian Messner.) Eighty-two stories of the marvelous and strange, from th Venerable Bede to John Steinbeck. Worth having.

Ray Stannard Baker Tells How Wilson 'Life and Letters' Came to Be Written

AMERICAN CHRONICLE

By Ray Stannard Baker. (Scribner's.)

Reviewed by JOSEPH H. BAIRD.

Ray Stannard Baker's literary career for the last two decades has been so closely linked with the personality of Woodrow Wilson that it is difficult to think of the author in any role other than that of the World War President's biographer. This volume is, fundamentally, the story of Mr. Baker himself. Yet in the concluding chapters he throws some new light on the tragic latter days of Wilson.

One story related by Mr. Baker deserves to rank as news, even though it is 25 years old. It involves the personalities of both Wilson and President Roosevelt.

When Wilson was returning from Paris on the George Washington in February, 1919, Mr. Baker relates, he decided in midocean to land in Boston rather than New York. The night before the landing was a stormy one and, the author says, the passage to Boston was unfamiliar to the ship's officers. Mr. Baker arose next morning to find the ship behind schedule and moving almost due south. It had lost its course earlier and gone northward toward the rocks off Gloucester Point.

On deck Mr. Baker met President Roosevelt, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy, who had been familiar since boyhood with the waters off Massachusetts. The President told him, he relates, that "we had been far too close to the rocks off Gloucester."

Might Have Changed History.

"In writing to me in 1939," Mr. Baker says, "Mr. Roosevelt added a touch to the well-remembered incidents of that fateful night when, as he said, we had the 'really narrow escape' near Gloucester Point:

"'Do you remember,' he asked in his letter, 'the party given below decks by the ship's crew when the leading "lady" with hairy arms and a rope wig kissed the President at the end of the play? Well, what would have happened, after that merry celebration, if the great ship had gone down?'"

Mr. Baker then speculates on how that tragedy might have changed world history.

But "American Chronicle" is far from being a postscript to the definitive "Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters," the origin and writing of which Baker reveals in great detail. Rather it is the story of a sensitive, mid-Western American boy and his reaction to the great social and political storms which swept this country in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Friendship With Wilson.

Through Mr. Baker's eyes we see Coxey's army moving on Washington, the bloody Pullman strike in Chicago, the rise of Eugene V. Debbs and Samuel Gompers as labor leaders and the "muckraking" crusaders of the pre-World War era. We learn, too, of the author's developing friendship with Woodrow Wilson and how the "Life and Letters" came to be written.

The latter chapters of the book are filled with arresting thumb-nail sketches: Col. House, "the eager secretary without profound responsibility"; Clemenceau, "serious for smaller immediate gains"; Lloyd George, "a poor third . . . pleased with every new compromise," and Orlando, "an amiable southern Italian without depth or vision."

Many books can be called either informative or entertaining. Few merit both adjectives. "American Chronicle," I believe, is one of those few.

Green Armor

By Osmar White. (Norton; $3.)

Osmar White is an Australian newspaperman. His book is his story of the war on New Guinea as he, with some originality, saw it. A good many books have already reported correspondents' reactions to that campaign and it has generally been agreed that it was, as another writer called it, "the toughest fighting in the world." Mr. White does not dispute that, but he disagrees with most of his predecessors on what actually happened.

A good part of his book is occupied with the period which most writers have passed over—the period before Gen. MacArthur took command and American supplies began to trickle in, the period when Port Moresby lay virtually open to the Japanese who were already established on the north shore of the island. It was in that time, says Mr. White, that the occupying forces learned what they had to know to win—the technique of jungle fighting. They learned it the expensive way, they learned it by doing the things they should not have done and paying the price, by sending ill-equipped troops out to follow defined trails, for instance, where the Japs, well-fitted in jungle gear slipped through the forests, avoiding paths. But they did learn it and so, when American aid finally arrived, they were able to use it effectively.

Osmar White.

Even so, in Mr. White's view, the victory was not United Nations' credit, but Japanese discredit. The enemy made a fatal error in trying to occupy New Guinea by land instead of conquering it by air. Land occupation required continued supply and the supply line was too long to be maintained. American naval operations disrupted it beyond repair. But had the Japs taken the other course and pasted Port Moresby by concentratedly from the air, the resistance would have collapsed before American help could have gotten there.

The book also differs with its predecessors on the nature of the fighting which took place after aid arrived. There was no great rally of the Australians and throwback of the enemy, Mr. White insists. There was never any clear cut fighting at any time, but only a dim desperate groping of patrols against patrols until finally the Japs gave out. The misery of this blind murder is depicted in the volume with something more than ordinary reporting's vividness. Mr. White made two long trips on foot into the jungle himself and his account of them leave no dreadful details to the imagination. The book also contains a section on the battle of Guadalcanal which the author saw in part as eye witness. —M-C. R.

Best Sellers

—NATION-WIDE—

(According to Publishers' Weekly.)

FICTION.

1st—Great Son, by Edna Ferber.
2d—The Green Years, A. J. Cronin.
3d—Earth and High Heaven, Gwethalyn Graham.
4th—Cannery Row, John Steinbeck.
5th—Captain From Castile, Samuel Shellabarger.

NONFICTION.

1st—Brave Men, Ernie Pyle.
2d—Anything Can Happen, George and Helen Papashvily.
3d—Try and Stop Me, Bennett Cerf.
4th—The Thurber Carnival, James Thurber.
5th—An Intelligent American's Guide to the Peace, edited by Sumner Welles.

—IN WASHINGTON—

FICTION.

1st—Cannery Row, John Steinbeck.
2d—The Green Years, A. J. Cronin.
3d—Immortal Wife, Irving Stone.
4th—Great Son, Edna Ferber.
5th—Strange Fruit, Lillian Smith.

NONFICTION.

1st—Anything Can Happen, George and Helen Papashvily.
2d—Brave Men, Ernie Pyle.
3d—The Vigil of a Nation, Lin Yutang.
4th—The World of Washington Irving, Van Wyck Brooks.
5th—The Gentlemen Talk of Peace, William B. Ziff.

New Books

Tell Sparta. $2.50. Feb. 28.
Death at the Door. $2. Feb. 26.
Fun on Horseback. $3. Feb. 26.
Golden Gate Country. $3. Feb. 28.
What to Do With Japan. $2. Feb. 23.
I Am Gazing Into My 8-Ball. $2. Feb. 23.
Image of Josephine. $2.50. Feb. 23.
This Time Forever. $2.50. Feb. 23.
No Traveler Returns. $2.50. Feb. 23.
The Selected Work of Tom Paine. $3.50. Feb. 22.
Cooked to Your Taste. $2. Feb. 23.
"Obequies at Oxford." $2. March 7.
"Green Armor." $3. March 5.
"Why Mothers Get Gray." $1.25. March 5.
"Take Three Tenses." $2. March 9.
"American Chronicle." $3.50. March 5.
"Voyage of the Golden Hind." $2.50. March 5.
"Two Lands for Mine." $2. March 5.
"Toward a Permanent Peace."
"Report From Red China." $3. March 7.
"Two Hundred Thousand Flyers." $2.75.

Blueprint for a New Japanese Nation After the Setting Sun of Defeat

WHAT TO DO WITH JAPAN

By Wilfrid Fleisher. (Doubleday, Doran; $2.)

JAPAN, A PHYSICAL, CULTURAL AND REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY.

By Glenn Thomas Trewartha. (University of Wisconsin Press, $5.)

By Ben H. Pearse.

The Japanese people will probably want and should be allowed to keep the institution of emperor, regardless of what becomes of Hirohito, but should be stripped of the heavy industry which would permit them to resume the present war after their approaching inevitable defeat.

The first phase of occupation of the Japanese islands would be to insure disarmament by the dismantling of dock yards, arsenals, munition plants and fortifications and the surrender of arms. The second would look to the establishment of a government which could administer the "empire," stripped of its conquests of the last 50 years, in a manner calculated to make it a useful member of a peaceful society.

These views in substance are those of one of the best qualified observers on affairs in the Far East, Wilfred Fleisher, former managing editor of the Japan Advertiser, his father's newspaper before him, until Japanese pressure forced abandonment of the enterprise in 1940, and now the author of a small, readable book, "What to Do With Japan," about as timely as could be when American forces are 750 miles from Tokyo, despite predictions the war will last another year or more.

Democratic Government.

"There have been times in Japan's modern, even in her current history," Mr. Fleisher said in an interview, "when she seemed inclining toward the democratic concepts of the Western World. Politically, there is a mass base for parliamentary procedures which are the basis of popular government. From the '80s to the '30s her electorate was gradually broadened from one of some 500,000, based upon a high property and financial qualification, to some 14,000,000, based on male suffrage for those over 25 years of age. Her literacy rate is higher than 90 per cent and the common conception of the Japanese as a near-sighted, slavishly imitative people has long since been disproved.

"However, since the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the entire nation has been dominated by a fanatical group of militarists who have out-Nazied the Nazis in their control of every phase of Japanese existence."

Industrial Prospects.

Mr. Fleisher believes Japan must be deprived of her conquests of the past half century, but that she must be permitted to retain her light industry in order to permit her to live and feed herself in normal trade with her neighbors. His book takes up in considerable detail, despite its brevity, practical phases of a program for handling the problem Japan will be when defeated.

Regarding the Emperor, he says, "It may be that 10 or 20 years after the end of the war the Japanese, of their own accord, may overthrow their imperial institution. It would be far better if they should rid themselves of it voluntarily following a period of tutelage in the democratic ways than if they were forcibly deprived of an Emperor at the time of their defeat and should seek instead to restore the imperial dynasty when the foreign supervision is withdrawn."

Another and much more elaborate volume on Japan, by Glenn Thomas Trewartha, from the University of Wisconsin Press, treats the war from an entirely different point of view, which might be described as materialistic. Two conflicting factors have brought Japan along the path she has followed in recent years, first, a rapidly expanding population, and, second, a dearth of many of the earth's natural resources. Remodeling her entire economy within a relatively few years, this nation of fishermen and small farmers became an industrial power that inevitably came in conflict with the holders of the resources she needed.

Crows Are Black Everywhere

By Herbert O. Yardley and Carl Grabo. (Putnam; $2.50.)

Though this novel belongs to the large fiction group consisting of spy thrillers, it has a good deal more substance than the common run of its kind. Its scene is Chungking and its cast of characters is not limited to the usual stereotypes—the hero, the heroine and the villians. Instead we have a large assortment of picturesque incidentals—beggars, half-castes, sing-song girls, derelict white men, opium addicts, refugees and the like—all of whom contribute their bit to foiling the Japanese fifth columnists who, to give variety, are represented chiefly by a handsome young American. Hero and heroine are both slow to emerge from the throng and it is not until one is well into the story that one perceives that the pretty American newspaper girl, Peggy, who begins by being unsympathetic to the Chinese, is going to lead in heart interest for Bill, the air adviser, who already has a noble-hearted and beautiful half-caste mistress. All this makes the book better than the ordinary, if only by means of variety.

The real interest of the authors has been in the problem of codes, which is only natural, for one of them, Maj. Herbert O. Yardley, is an old code man, having been head of the American cryptographic department for 10 years and author of "The American Black Chamber," a well known book on cryptography. Much of the work of foiling the Japs in the story depends on code reading and the way this is handled shows plainly that an expert has dealt with it. The other author, Carl Grabo, is professor of English at Chicago University. Presumably, he has supplied the writing polish. But, however the division of labor was made, the book is a credit to its composers. It is much more solid and convincing than any fiction of its kind I have recently come upon. —M-C. R.

RICHARD WRIGHT.

Richard Wright Tells the Story Of His Youth

BLACK BOY

By Richard Wright. (Harper; $2.50.)

For an author of a comparatively limited output, Richard Wright has won remarkable fame. His first volume, a short collection of stories, "Uncle Tom's Children," brought him wide attention and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His novel, "Native Son," won the Harper prize and was made into a successful play. Yet, for all the acclaim which has attended him his stock of ideas so far has been one, a message of racial issues. In this new book he leaves the field of fiction and goes into autobiography. He tells us the story of his boyhood and youth in Mississippi and he produces the most convincing thing yet to come from his pen.

It is a story of horrors worse than those with which Mr. Wright loads his Negro fictional heroes and yet, writing of himself, he does a thing which he has not done for the characters of his creation—he displays a sense of life apart from race issues. He lived his early years in a solely Negro environment; indeed, he says, he was not aware of white attitudes until he was in his teens. But long before that he was in rebellion.

He found Negro conventions, superstitions and social mores intolerable before he came into conflict with white prejudice. He was well inured to brutality before he learned that the source of Negro misery was white oppression. The picture of the life in grandmother's home, where he suffered the most wanton cruelty from his pious and conforming elders, is not a picture of race wrongs. It is the old picture of the incipient artist baited by the Philistines in all societies. Except that it was carried out on a level of ignorance and poverty which compels some extenuation, the process could be the history of a hundred young white artists of a dozen nationalities.

But when he went from home into the working world of the South, Mr. Wright did meet race oppression in all its ugliness. And from the experience he drew, as he says, his "life's passion." He was by then obsessed with a sence of being wronged and race prejudice was the great overall cause. He made it his target. The mere fact, however, that he now can present Negro society objectively indicates that his work is becoming free of his bitter personal emotion. If the present book is an indication, he is moving toward a breadth which in the past he has conspicuously lacked. —M-C. R.

Among the Authors

When HARNETT KANE'S "Delta Country" came out (Star review, November 12), the railway system was not up to keeping an adequate flow of the book pouring into New Orleans. This was Mr. Kane's home town and an enormous autographing party had to go on, sans books. . . . Now everything is arranged for 100,000 editions of it for the armed forces. . . . Kane always writes about the locale in which he lives—Louisiana—and "The Delta Country" was his third and most successful book. "The Louisiana Hayride" and "The Bayous of Louisiana" had a merry life on their own and help appreciably in supporting Mr. Kane in handsome fashion while he finishes the manuscript for a fourth, tentatively titled "The Plantations of Louisiana"—although he may change its name if he likes before it is printed.

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STERLING NORTH'S "Midnight and Jeremiah" and "Greased Lightning," two books for children, sold to Walt Disney this week for 40-minute featurettes.

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ERLE STANLEY GARDNER has broken his own record, with 4,903,685 copies of his mysteries selling in North America during 1944. This was a mere 400,000 more than the year before, although he set a world record each year.